"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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ART AND THE COUNTRY CHURCH

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"She lived here as a girl. Her mother's father was one of Stanton's first settlers....Yes, her musical education has included work in London, Paris and Austria....Her father died when she was a little girl. He was a music teacher. Her mother married again and her foster father has given her this education....She practiced regularly eight hours daily....She will give only two concerts in this country before returning to play a series that she is under contract to present in Europe....She is spoken of as the greatest living interpreter of Mozart." From such comments by the homefolks at Stanton, Iowa, I learned about the career of Esther Johnsson, who, on a Tuesday evening in May 1933, was presenting a piano concert under the auspices of the Ladies' Aid Society of the Lutheran Church. At the same time I caught some of the spirit and more clearly saw the reason why this church in a small country village in southwestern Iowa had been selected on an earlier occasion as one of the "churches of distinction in town and country work." In addition to providing spiritual leadership and a community social center, it has been a patron of the arts. The church structure is itself a work of art. The architects, though I am told they were amateurs, succeeded in achieving a beautiful gothic style in a rather modest frame building. When a pipe organ was installed the members of the church would be satisfied with nothing but the best. They have always endeavored to keep a highly trained organist and choir leader.

Too often studies of the country church make little reference to the aesthetic elements in the church program. Even "par standards" for church work deal with it distantly in such references as "comfortable, attractive parsonage," or "All property kept in good repair and sightly condition." Still there is a growing interest in rural art. The opportunities were never greater for community leadership in this field. Other rural agencies are noting the situation and planning accordingly. Farmers' organizations have their musical groups and drama tournaments. Agricultural journals report pastoral symphonies in several states. Rural schools are promoting choirs and orchestras.

Five years ago an American Country Life Association committee made a study of the arts in rural America and after surveying programs which were enriching rural life recommended a classification of "rural cultural arts," which included twelve types of activity:

1. Music
2. Drama
3. Folklore
4. Sports and folk games
5. Handicraft
6. Painting, sculpture and allied arts

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7. Home and countryside beautification
8. Literary pursuits
9. Exhibits
10. Conservation of records and treasures
11. Photography
12. Art in work

This list was used, January 1936, by the Extension Service of Iowa State College in obtaining an expression from clergymen regarding rural art trends in Iowa communites. The first two hundred replies, when tabulated, showed that in the opinions of these men the interest in each type of program was increasing.

One hundred forty-seven ministers reported a growing interest in music, whereas twenty-seven indicated "no change" and seventeen said that interest was fading. The situation was relatively the same in communities of different sizes: (a) villages under 1000, (b) villages 1000 to 2500, (c) towns 2500 to 5000, and (d) cities over 5000.

Next to music, people are increasingly concerned with home and countryside beautification. Where eleven of the two hundred clergymen reflected a decreasing interest, one hundred fifteen were of the opinion that folks in their communities were growing in their appreciation and desire for landscape development.

Sports and folk games ranked third from the standpoint of net increase of interest. Popularity of the others appeared to be in the order: drama, exhibits, handicraft, literary pursuits, conservation of records and treasures, art in work, painting, sculpture and allied arts, folk lore and photography.

There is little that is new in the idea that art should be featured by the country church. The cathedrals, constructed centuries ago, stand as monuments to an interest in architectural beauty. Poetry, literature, great paintings and musical compositions which have been created by religious leaders are enjoyed by generation after generation in all sections of the civilized world.

In present day rural communities there are a variety of ways in which churches are contributing to the advancement of beauty. In one county seat town a Sunday School is undertaking a study of religious paintings. A church in the open country has its orchestra. In a village the boys and girls fresco their own rooms in the church--subject to approval of their designs. At the same place the construction of an outdoor fireplace enlisted forty men and boys in landscaping the church grounds. Here, also, there are eight choirs in which twenty percent of the church membership have been participating. The pastor of another church reports: "Best music is encouraged. Drama is being used in church and school. The 4-H clubs are encouraged in music and art."

Religion and art have much in common. Each is creative. Values in both are abstract. Logically, they go hand in hand. Since new land and physical resources are no longer available, a better rural America can be achieved only through intensive developments. In these realms of the spirit and of the arts frontiers can be advanced without limits. Farm people deal with growing things; they have an opportunity to be creative denied those in standardized occupations; their general point of view, to a degree, is that of the artist. Rural leaders in church, school and rural organization groups are finding in the arts ways of consistently contributing to an ever expanding and adventuresome rural life.